



The View From Heifer Hill—September 2022

Fearless



My brother Jerry's first car was an old white Nash Rambler. There is a memorable photo of him leaning against it, his head thrown back, flaxen hair glowing. I thought of this photo when one of the orphaned beaver kits I was raising wouldn't stay with his siblings. We started calling him Rambler, and because of that famous picture we called him Nash Rambler, and because he was a beaver that became Gnash. Gnash Rambler. When he later became sick and would eat only canned pumpkin, we started calling him Pumpkin. I'm sorry to say, that's the name that stuck. Pumpkin has remained a bold explorer, a trait that may lead to trouble now that he is living in the wild.

I had cause to wonder about personality and survival again this week when I released some young opossums. These joeys had been rescued from their mother's pouch after she had been killed by a car. After a month of hands-on care, I moved them to a pre-release enclosure and stopped handling them. Now the time had come to catch them to transport them to their new homes.

Opossums have more teeth than any other North American mammal and showing them to you is their first line of defense. When I

peeked into their nest, I saw hundreds of pointy white teeth and heard some low growls. One of these opossums, however, greeted me with curious sniffings.

I needed to be careful to avoid being bitten as I transferred the others to their carriers, but the bold opossum walked into the carrier on his own. Once in the car, he gave every indication of enjoying the outing, grooming himself, snoozing, rubbing his cheeks on his bedding.

I took the opossums to promising release sites, tucked their crates into dense vegetation, opened the doors, and left them there. It can take opossums hours to get up their nerve to venture forth. When I unzipped the door on the bold possum's carrier, however, he strolled right out. Kevin and Erin, the property owners, were there to admire their new neighbor. This joey strolled over and sniffed Erin's foot before taking an interest in the giant brush pile that would offer him shelter on his first night. He set off eagerly to explore. Surely, such a trusting creature was doomed.

On my way home, I tried to imagine scenarios in which this fearless opossum would have a survival advantage. If bold explorers survive their youth, they will know more locations of food and shelter than a timid animal would. They might form alliances. I could imagine this opossum becoming pals with the big orange cat that had been eying



him at the release site. He'd probably follow the cat right into the house and take up residence in a comfy chair.

That night, I visited the beaver formerly known as Gnash. Now two years old, he and his mate have settled down in a pretty little pond. Have his ramblings ceased? Hardly.

The measure for the success of genes is whether or not they replicate. From the standpoint of his genes, I have evidence that Pumpkin's inclination to ramble has not been a handicap. When I shone my light across the water, I saw beavers paddling in my direction—Pumpkin, Pye, and three little Nutmegs. Pumpkin climbed up the bank and flopped down beside me to enjoy some apples and carrots. Pye hummed

a greeting from the water and then climbed ashore as well. Two kits bobbed for apples in the shallows. The third approached in cautious zig-zags.

When the apples were gone, the shyest kit towed an aspen twig back to the lodge. Pumpkin returned to the water and a kit swam up beside him. Pumpkin rolled over, gave the kit a shove and a squeaky wrestling match ensued. Bested, Pumpkin swam over to sit with Pye. They were grooming each other as I packed up to go. The ability to survive and reproduce is only one way to judge success. I imagined the fearless opossum out savoring the flavors of summer and going for a stroll with his new friend the big orange cat.

